

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A Community Needs Assessment is an exercise by which a collaborative partnership gathers information on the current strengths, concerns, and conditions of children, families, and the community. The information comes from many sources—especially parents and family members—and is elicited by many techniques, including interviews, focus groups, and scanning demographic data collected by local agencies. Because many types of partners participate in a community assessment—strategic planners, program staff, administrators, teachers, parents, and other community members—the resulting information is broad, accurate, and useful.

Community assessments focus on local assets, resources, and activities as well as gaps, barriers, or emerging needs. The process of identifying and appraising this information will help your collaborative partnership:

- clearly understand the context in which families live and issues families want to address;
- locate hidden strengths or underutilized resources that could be developed;
- determine which resources could contribute to comprehensive strategies; and in what way;
- design effective, collaborative strategies that engage children and families because they respond to real and important conditions; and
- empower families and community members by giving them a role in designing and implementing the strategies.

FOUR WAYS TO GATHER COMMUNITY INFORMATION

1. Focus Groups - Focus groups are structured, moderated discussions that bring together small groups of people (usually six to 12) in neutral settings to talk about specific issues. Discussion is a powerful means of learning families and community members about their perceptions, experiences, values, and beliefs. It is also a good way to encourage community involvement.
2. Community Forums - Like focus groups, community forums seek information directly from community members, but forums use large public meetings instead of small group settings. Forums are an excellent opportunity for families and other community members to raise concerns and become involved in developing strategies.

3. Interviews and Surveys - As with other methods of data, interviews and surveys help a partnership understand the perspectives (or variety of perspectives), experiences, aspirations, strengths, and values of individual families. Children, youth, family members, and key community or religious leaders can participate in interviews, paper and pencil survey, and other types of self-reporting.
4. Action Research - This approach enables partners to develop research based on action. For example, practitioners may trace a family's ongoing progress through the maze of services and supports in a community, and assess ways a partnership could work with family members. The practitioner-researchers document each of the family's interactions with agencies. The resulting case study shows in great detail how a family finds and uses community resources and opportunities.

STEPS TO CONDUCTING A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

1. Appoint a task force/committee to oversee the project and determine the timeline, the focus of the assessment, the tools and how the outcomes will be reported.
2. The task force committee will identify the stakeholders who will be part of the assessment. These stakeholders can come from the following:
 - educators/teachers
 - faith-based organizations/churches
 - families (represented by adults, youth, children, elderly)
 - community leaders
 - political representatives
 - social/cultural organizations
 - business/employers
 - state departments: Social Services, Mental Health, Elementary/Secondary Education, Health and Senior Services, etc.
 - Volunteers and advocacy groups
 - Other
3. Once the stakeholders have been identified the next decision will be deciding on the focus of your Community Needs Assessment. Is it going to be general (concerns of the overall citizenship) or specific (individual topics such as crime, safety, literacy, housing, etc.)?

4. Next, you will need to develop the questionnaire/survey and decide what forum will be used to capture information (public meetings, focus groups, questionnaires, telephone surveys, mass mailings, and/or interviewing key community representatives).
5. Next steps:
 - Implement the plan with a timeline
 - Generate a final report with recommendations
 - Leverage the final report for future growth of the municipality
 - Go after future funders!

HELPFUL COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SOURCES LINKS

- Bureau of Census (301-457-4608)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (202-606-7828)
- US Department of Housing and Urban Development (202-708-1422)
- Annual Reports prepared by cities, counties, and states
- Public health data and vital statistics: State and local departments of Health and Human Services
- US Department of Education (800-USA-LEARN)
- National Center for Education Statistics (202-219-1828), and state and local education agencies
- Child welfare and juvenile justice data: US Dept. of Justice (202-307-0765), and local/state juvenile and criminal justice agencies.
- Information on children and youth: Kids Count data books (410-547-6600), the Children's Defense Fund (202-628-8787), Natl. Center for Children in Poverty (212-927-8793), and county/local agencies.

HELPFUL COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Utah State University Extension <http://extension.usu.edu/files/SGuide.pdf>

Port Jervis New York <http://www.portjervisny.org/mainstreetprogram.htm>

Oxford County, Southwestern Ontario www.ocl.net/needs/four.html

Essex County, Ontario
<http://www.essexcs.on.ca/Data/Needs/Needs%20Assessment%202002.pdf>

